



Image courtesy of the Member

Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan 1955–

TERRITORIAL DELEGATE 2009–
DEMOCRAT FROM THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

Representing a territory including more than a dozen volcanic islands that is 15 time zones away from Washington, D.C., Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan is the first Delegate for the Northern Mariana Islands in the U.S. House of Representatives. Early in his first term, Sablan, who prefers to be called Congressman Kilili, noted, “We’ve been a commonwealth for 33 years, and we became citizens in 1986. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”¹

Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan, born on the island of Saipan on January 19, 1955, is the oldest of seven children of Jesus Diaz Sablan and Victorina Camacho Sablan.² Sablan graduated from Marianas High School before attending the University of Guam, Armstrong University at Berkeley, and the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He served in the United States Army from 1981 to 1986. Sablan and his wife, Andrea, have six children and four grandchildren.

In 1976, when Sablan was 21 years old, President Gerald Ford approved P.L. 94-241, formalizing a covenant between the Northern Mariana Islands and the United States. The new Commonwealth government was established on January 9, 1978, and three years later, Sablan began working for the first governor, Carlos S. Camacho. Sablan hailed from a political family—his uncle, Vicente D. Sablan, and his grandfather, SN. Sablan, were both mayors of Saipan—and like them, he gravitated to public service. In 1982 Sablan was elected to the Commonwealth legislature, where he served until 1986. After his stint in the legislature, Sablan worked as an aide to Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii and later as an aide to the governor of the Commonwealth. Sablan was appointed Executive Director of the Commonwealth Election Commission in 1999.³

In May 2008, more than 30 years after the original covenant, President George W. Bush signed P.L. 110-229, granting the Islands a Delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives. Later that fall, Sablan left his position with the election commission and entered a nine-way race for the new seat.⁴ In the early 1980s, he was chairman of the Northern Marianas’ Democratic Party, but by the time of the 2008 general election, Sablan had grown frustrated with what he considered a highly unorganized Democratic Party and opted to run as an Independent instead. His biggest competition came from Republican Pete A. Tenorio, the incumbent Washington representative.⁵ Sablan edged out Tenorio by 357 votes, winning 24 percent of the total vote. In 2010 he won re-election in a four-way contest with 43 percent of the vote.⁶

Sablan was assigned to the Committee on Natural Resources and the Committee on Education and Labor for the 111th Congress (2009–2011). He caucused with the Democratic Party. In the 112th Congress (2011–2013), Sablan serves on the Natural Resources and Agriculture Committees. Focusing on the basic needs of his territory, he has introduced more than 40 bills during his career to bolster educational, environmental, and labor programs on or affecting the islands. Moreover, he has made it a point to educate Congress on the conditions in the Northern Marianas, especially the lack of fresh, potable drinking water. “[W]e just don’t have 24-hour water,” he said on the House Floor, noting that many residents of the Northern Marianas lack simple access to sewer systems. “And not just that, but if you’re lucky enough to get two to three hours of water a day, you can’t drink that water anyway,” he added.⁷

In both the 111th and 112th Congresses, Sablan has introduced legislation to convey submerged land rights to the Northern Mariana Islands.⁸ The bill passed the House in the 111th Congress but died in the Senate. “The Northern Mariana Islands is the only U.S. jurisdiction that does not have ownership of the submerged lands three miles off its shores,” he noted upon reintroducing the bill in the 112th Congress.⁹ Delegate Sablan also seeks equal treatment for the Northern Mariana Islands regarding other federal legislation and entitlements.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 Kris Kitto, “This Man Is No Island,” April 20, 2009, *The Hill*; quotation from *Congressional Record*, House, 111th Cong., 1st sess. (14 May 2009): H5657.
- 2 “Official Biography of Congressman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan,” <http://sablan.house.gov/about-me/full-biography>, (accessed 21 May 2012); “About,” Kilili for Congress Facebook Page, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Kilili-for-Congress/112096108825189?sk=info> (accessed 9 May 2012).
- 3 “Progress in the Pacific,” 15 November 1986, *Christian Science Monitor*: 19; “Official Biography of Congressman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan,” <http://sablan.house.gov/about-me/full-biography> (accessed 24 May 2012); *Politics in America, 2012* (Washington, D.C.: CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2011): 1090.
- 4 *Congressional Record*, House, 111th Cong., 1st sess. (24 March 2009): H3785; “Official Biography of Congressman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan,” <http://sablan.house.gov/about-me/full-biography> (accessed 24 May 2012).
- 5 From 1978 to 2008, the Northern Mariana Islands elected a Resident Representative to the United States. This representative was not a Member of the House of Representatives, but served as an advocate for the Northern Mariana Islands. Frank S. Rosario, “Sablan Leads CNMI’s U.S. Congress Delegate Race,” *Pacific Magazine*, www.pacificmagazine.net (accessed 5 November 2008).
- 6 *Politics in America, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2009): 1130; *Politics in America, 2012*: 1090.
- 7 *Congressional Record*, House, 111th Cong., 1st sess. (14 May 2009): H5656–H5657.
- 8 H.R. 934, 111th Congress; H.R. 670, 112th Congress.
- 9 *Congressional Record*, House, 112th Cong., 1st sess. (10 February 2011): E203.